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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [KNNP](#) [IR](#) [KU](#)
SUBJECT: PM MAKES SURPRISE TRIP TO IRAN; AMIR MAY FOLLOW

REF: KUWAIT 1092

Classified By: Political Counselor Pete O'Donohue for reasons 1.4 b and d

¶1. (C) Summary: Kuwait's Prime Minister led a high-level delegation to Tehran on November 21-22 for a short-notice visit that served multiple purposes. While the visit was hyped in glowing terms in the Iranian press, the Kuwaiti reaction has been more muted, and post,s interlocutors point to mixed goals for the trip -- and mixed achievements. One goal appears to have been to try to dampen tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia prior to Kuwait's hosting of the GCC Summit December 14-16. The PM also reportedly carried a message from Russian FM Lavrov that Tehran should take the overseas nuclear fuel deal on the table and that continued Iranian delay was exasperating even Tehran,s friends. The PM's accompanying delegation included senior commercial and economic officials who discussed increasing bilateral trade and resolving continental shelf issues, including a shared gas field -- a signal that the GoK is prepared to pursue gas options with Iran if other options fizzle -- although progress on this issue was limited. Perhaps equally importantly, the visit also gave the PM -- beleaguered domestically by calls for parliamentary grilling and even his removal on corruption charges -- a chance to get out of town and burnish his credentials as a statesman (he spent 14 years in Tehran as Kuwait,s ambassador, speaks fluent Farsi, and prides himself as something of an Iran expert). The PM returned only briefly to Kuwait November 22 before continuing on official travel to the Vatican, Bosnia and Serbia. Iranian officials have announced that the PM,s visit will be followed by a high-level Iranian delegation after Eid, and that the Amir is expected to travel to Iran within the next three months. Post will seek further details regarding the trip upon the travelling party,s return at the end of this week. End Summary.

¶2. (C) In a gambit that grabbed headlines but left Kuwaitis and diplomats in a bit of puzzlement, Prime Minister Shaykh Nasser Al-Mohammed Al Sabah led a high-level delegation on a weekend visit to Tehran that was barely announced before his plane took off (and we understand from collateral sources that the proposal was only put forward by the Iranian side earlier that week). Reportedly accompanying the PM on his November 21-22 visit to Teheran were Deputy PM and Foreign Minister Shaykh Dr. Mohammed Al Saabah, Oil and Information Minister Shaykh Ahmad Al Abdullah Al Sabah, Finance Minister Mustafa Al-Shamali, Commerce and Industry Minster Ahmad Al-Haroun, Communications Minister Dr. Mohammed Al-Bosairi, Electricity and Water Minister Dr. Bader Al-Shuraiaan, Director General of the Arab Fund for Arab Economic Development Abdulwahab Al-Bader, Managing Director of the Kuwait Investment Authority Bader Al-Saad and Director of the Civil Aviation Authority Fawaz Al-Farah, as well as MFA U/S

Khalid Jarallah. The PM was hosted in Tehran by Iranian Vice President Mohammed Reza Rahimi; he also met briefly with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

¶3. (C) According to Kuwaiti press accounts, which relied heavily on reports from Iran's official press agency, the aim of the visit was to review the spectrum of bilateral political and economic issues, with a focus on enhancing economic cooperation. Press accounts state that two MOUs were signed in the areas of trade, water and electricity but no details have yet been provided. Press accounts also suggest that the two sides discussed issues related to unresolved border demarcations along the two countries shared maritime border, known to be rich in natural gas, and also discussed the Al-Durra oil field. Some press accounts also suggested that the two sides had discussed enhanced access to Iranian goods through a Kuwaiti port. Immediately upon his return from Tehran the PM briefed the Amir -- with Kuwaiti media announcing that the Amir will also visit Tehran in "coming months." The peripatetic PM then immediately departed Kuwait en route to Italy, the Vatican, Bosnia and Serbia.

¶4. (C) Most of the senior Kuwaiti officials on the trip have accompanied the PM to Europe and have consequently been unavailable to comment on the visit. However, during Ambassador's November 23 call on Interior Minister Shayikh Jaber Khaled Al Sabah, the Minister -- a noted Iranian skeptic who recalled being shaken from his bed by the impact of an Iranian missile in the 1980s -- downplayed the

KUWAIT 00001107 002 OF 003

significance of the visit, cautioning observers to focus on what is written in the Kuwaiti press, while taking what appears in the Iranian press with a grain of salt. Asked about whether the possibility of opening a port to Iranian goods had been discussed, the Minister asked rhetorically what the Iranians would export -- "uranium?" He observed that opening an Iran-specific port would be of little use to Kuwait, since the Iranians have few "legal" goods that would interest Kuwait but continue to be a problematic purveyor of "illegal" goods (i.e. drugs).

¶5. (C) Kuwaiti Iran-watchers confess that they were caught off guard by the unannounced visit and remain unclear about its purpose or significance. Dr. Abdul Wahid Al-Khalifan, a moderate Shi'a university dean and noted local pundit on Iran affairs told PolCouns on November 23 that he suspected the PM's recent troubles in Parliament -- he is scheduled to be "grilled" (interpellated) on charges he bribed an MP on December 8 (reftel) -- might have been one reason for the PM to get out of town. By leading a high-level delegation to Iran and then traveling on to Europe, the PM is at least able to generate some headlines that focus less on his domestic troubles than on his international accomplishments -- and will give time for the PM's staff to try to work a compromise with the Parliament that would delay his grilling until after the GCC summit. As Kuwait's former long-term Ambassador in Tehran (where he served for 14 years), the PM has some expertise on Iran and, Khalifan suggested, can use the trip to bolster his credentials as a statesman.

¶6. (C) Khalifan also noted that Kuwait and Iran have long had under consideration a number of oil, water and gas agreements, but these have never been finalized; if the PM is, in fact, able to move some of these forward it could be viewed as a solid achievement. Khalifan added that a central aim of the visit is to allow Kuwait to play a role in mediating present tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, particularly as a means to enhance Kuwait's stature prior to its hosting of the December 14-16 GCC Summit. Khalifan said his sources indicate that it is "certain" that the PM intended to encourage the large number of Iranian pilgrims

expected to embark on the hajj this week "to behave" when they are in Saudi Arabia; Khalfan believes he also urged the Iranians to back off on their support for Houthi rebels in Yemen and to curtail the "war of words" currently being waged between Iranian and Saudi media. Khalfan suggested that the fact the PM brought with him a high-level delegation with a commercial focus indicated he also hoped for to nail down some trade agreements, but details remain murky.

17. (C) Dr. Abdullah Al-Shayjji, another noted Kuwaiti Iran-watcher, told PolCouns on November 24 that he too believed the focus of the trip was to enable Kuwait to play a peace-maker role between Iran and Saudi Arabia prior to the GCC Summit, with a focus on de-escalating tensions over the Iran's alleged support for the Houthi and Saudi worries over the presence of larger numbers of Iranians during the Hajj. Al-Shayjji agreed with Al-Khalfan that the presence on the PM's delegation of senior cabinet officials suggested an interest in enhanced commercial ties, but observed that any actual results remain very unclear. The fact, he noted, that neither side announced the visit in advance and that the visit did not result in a joint communique or even in a joint press statement suggests that not much of substance was actually accomplished.

18. (C) A private Amcit who met with FM Dr. Mohammed Al-Sabah before the latter's departure for Tehran to accompany the PM told Ambassador November 19 that the FM had indicated receipt that morning of a letter from Russian FM Lavrov asking Kuwait to try to impress upon the Iranian leadership that now is the time to take the nuclear fuel deal on the table, and that even Tehran's friends (read: Moscow) were becoming impatient with continued Iranian vacillation.

19. (C) Comment: How much success Kuwait's PM was able to achieve on the foregoing agenda items remains to be seen. It is noteworthy that while the Iranian press was in full-blown rosy scenario mode, the Kuwaiti media and Iran watchers were more nuanced, noting that discussions on the continental shelf did not make substantial progress and indicating that it was Iran which sought Kuwait's assistance in reducing tensions with Riyadh. Kuwait needs natural gas to power its growing electricity and desal needs; and reaching out to Iran

KUWAIT 00001107 003 OF 003

was no doubt intended to make sure that others -- particularly Iraq but also Qatar -- got the message that the Iranian option remains in play. Post will follow-up to get further details of the trip upon the return of the PM's delegation from Europe. End Comment.

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JONES